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Understanding the Experiences of Provisionally Admitted Black Male College Students in the State of Georgia

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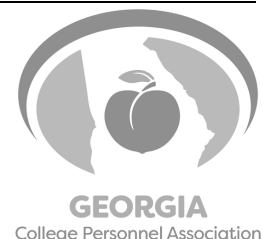
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Colleges and universities, both within Georgia and nationwide, admit students who do not fully meet institutional admission standards. Typically referred to as provisional admits, the students then have requirements they must meet in order to gain full admission status. In Georgia, small percentages of provisionally admitted students graduate on time. Coupled with nationwide graduation rates for Black male students, the number of Black male provisionally admitted students who graduate on time is concerning low. Further understanding of this phenomenon is needed to better support Black male students who enter Georgia institutions with provisional admission status. The purpose of the study was to explore perceptions of first-time, full-time Black male provisionally accepted students to achieve a clear understanding of factors that contribute to their academic success. The researcher utilized a phenomenological approach and multiple methods of data collection. This resulted in rich data that has been categorized into the overarching themes of “a provisional opportunity” and “family matters.” Implications for student affairs professionals, faculty, and other stakeholders are provided, as well as recommendations for future research on provisionally admitted Black male college students.

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College students arrive on campus with various levels of academic readiness. Colleges and universities, both within the state of Georgia and nationwide, provisionally admit students who do not fully meet institutional admission standards. These students may not have a high enough Grade Point Average (GPA), high school class rank, and/or standardized test scores (Adebayo, 2008; Palmer & Davis, 2012). As provisionally admitted students are particularly at risk for non-degree completion (Adebayo, 2008; Nora & Crisp, 2012), institutions have established requirements for the population to meet in order to gain full admission status. These include provisions such as remedial coursework, minimum GPA requirements, required tutoring, and supplemental academic advising (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). These conditions, coupled with factors such as socioeconomic status, precollege experiences, and self-efficacy, may have a significant impact on Black male students' social and academic experience within the higher education setting (Harper, 2012).

According to the University System of Georgia (USG), 37% of the student population at two-year state colleges and 18% of the student population at four-year state universities require remediation. More specifically, two-year state colleges have only 7% three-year graduation rate among provisionally accepted students; four-year state

universities have a 25% six-year graduation rate among the population (USG, 2016). State institutions are responsible for the most significant increase in graduation rates over the past ten years because of their accessibility nationwide (Doyle, 2010). State institutions provide admission and learning opportunities for students who otherwise would not be eligible to apply for admission, through provisional acceptance. In Georgia, these are students who do not meet minimum admission requirements such as acceptable scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT and/or a minimum high school GPA (USG, 2016).

The purpose of the study was to explore perceptions of first-time, full-time Black male provisionally accepted students to achieve a clear understanding of factors that contribute to their academic success. The insights gained from this phenomenological study will help student affairs professionals, faculty, and stakeholders understand more clearly how provisionally admitted Black male students' lived experiences influence their self-efficacy, sense of autonomy, and collegiate experience. If needed, professionals can initiate early intervention opportunities for these students to become more engaged in their academic journey. The research question addresses students' perspectives of challenges and significant issues faced during the first academic year as

well as factors contributing to the success of those students participating in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of race, gender, and other social identities complicate how students experience the college environment. In a multi-institutional study of 40 Black men engaged in campus life, Brooms (2017) discussed the concept of “Blackmaleness”, a framework originally developed by Matua (2006). According to Matua (2006), Black men develop identities and coping strategies due to societal forces that impede their success. Matua noted that Black men often encounter suspicion, have fewer opportunities, and face oppression because they are “both Black and men; that is, Black men are oppressed by gendered racism” (p. 6). Brooms (2017) indicated that framing research on Black male college students around the concept of Blackmaleness is beneficial as it provides context for the challenges Black males experience in society and how being Black and being male influences one’s college experience.

Harper’s (2012) qualitative study “The National Black Male College Achievement Study” focused on Black undergraduate men at 42 different college sites. The 219 study participants were Black males who had been successful in postsecondary education. Harper discussed the many factors

influencing the academic success, retention, and graduation rates of the population. These factors were categorized in three areas: precollege socialization readiness (family support, K-12 experiences, and college preparatory resources), college achievement (classroom experiences, engagement outside of class, and supplemental educational experiences), and post-college success (enrollment in graduate schools and career readiness). Harper found less than 50% of Black males graduated on time compared to nearly 80% of White males (2012).

Further, Superville (2015) asserted there was an increased graduation rate gap between Black and Caucasian males by nearly 20 points from 2009-2010 and 2012-2013, nationally. In 2012, the national graduation rate for Black males was 59% and 80% for White males (Superville, 2015). Superville noted of the 48 reporting states, 35 reported Black male high school graduation rates were lowest of all races and ethnicities when gender was also considered (20%). Georgia was included among the bottom six states with low Black male graduation rates, more specifically Richmond County (27%) and Chatham County (27%) (Superville, 2015). He contended it is difficult to find true data regarding graduation rates as it is often times manipulated by the state. The research provides insight on pre-college factors and missed opportunities to learn, for example,

the excessiveness of Black male students identified as special needs and receiving out-of-school suspension. These factors may have a direct effect on this group of students' college readiness as only 16-20% graduate from college in Georgia (Superville, 2015).

According to Jenson (2011), several factors influence retention on an individual level (educational achievement, assertiveness, and contentment), institutional (academic commitment), and social and external level (social and familial support). These factors illustrate the multi-layered obstacles students contend with as they try to matriculate and successfully adjust both academically and socially. These factors also influence student success. Jenson (2011) suggested students' ability to integrate into a new environment is based on past experiences such as their academic performance in high school, personal characteristics, and social skills. Black male students often struggle with this transitional and integrative experience.

Community colleges, according to Cooper (2010), provide growing academic opportunities for millions of students. These institutions have policies that support open admissions for students with college deficiencies, have flexible course schedules, and are cost effective. Cooper focused on the social support and services at community colleges as opposed to larger universities to

compare the success of students. These support services improved the academic success, including retention and persistence of students needing remediation (Cooper, 2010). The following examples of social support systems found on community college campuses have been found to help improve the academic success of students requiring remediation: academic guidance and advising, student success courses, learning communities, financial aid advice and support, and social networks (Cooper, 2010).

Flowers (2006) reported Black males struggled with academic and social integration at both two-year state colleges and four-year state universities. He noted Black males experienced lower levels of academic and social integration and engagement at two-year colleges than at four-year institutions. In short, what works at four-year colleges may not hold true at two-year colleges for Black males. The mission of community colleges is to provide "open-access to post-secondary opportunities for under-served communities" (Wood & Williams, 2013, p.2). Wood and Williams (2013) indicated Black male students represent 55% of enrolled students at two-year institutions. Of the total Black male population enrolled in two-year institutions, 82% of Black male students will enroll in public two-year colleges. In their research, Wood and Williams used two-year colleges and community colleges

interchangeably. The authors asserted this population of students enroll in community colleges because the institutions are flexible and facilitate a smooth transition while meeting their social and economic needs.

Although community colleges provide open opportunities for the under-served, Wood and Williams (2013) suggested factors influencing persistence, achievement, and graduation cause nearly 12% of Black males to drop out one year after enrolling, and 83% after 6 years without completing their program of study. The purpose of their study was to inform administrators of community colleges of the factors that affect academic success and persistence of Black males. Wood and Williams (2013) bridged the gap in literature by exploring the experiences of Black male students enrolled in community colleges compared to those enrolled in four-year institutions.

Wood, Newman, and Harris III (2015) explored self-efficacy as a determinant of academic integration among Black males in community college. Using data from the National Center of Educational Statistics Educational Longitudinal Study, the authors examined 212,703 Black male community college students enrolled in 2006. Specifically exploring math and English self-efficacy, Wood et al. (2015) found that math self-efficacy was predictive of several academic integration measures, including discussing

academics with faculty, meeting with advisors, and using library resources; English self-efficacy was not found to be statistically significant. Wood et al. (2015) provide programmatic and curricular implications applicable to both community colleges and four-year institutions. Programs designed to aid students in the transition from high school such as summer bridge, learning communities, and first year experience programming were of particular note. The researchers highlight remedial course offerings and availability of student support services as additional implications. Finally, the authors stress the importance of meeting with faculty and academic advisors, describing them as “integral to student persistence and success” (p. 15) among the population. The authors suggest strategies such as faculty requiring students to meet during office hours and academic advisors utilizing an intrusive advising model, particularly for Black men with lower levels of self-efficacy in the researched areas (2015).

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) and Bryan and Simmons (2009) both conducted studies on first-generation college students and the importance of family support systems. In McCarron and Inkelas’s (2006) quantitative study of 1879 students, parental involvement played a significant role in the degree attainment aspirations of first generation college students. For participants in

their study, home-based involvement such as discussions with parents about school had the biggest influence on their degree aspirations. Bryan and Simmons's (2009) qualitative study of 10 first-generation college students from the Appalachian region of the United States found several themes relating to family support systems: close-knit families and communities, separate identities [from their families], pressure to succeed, returning home, and the pervasiveness of poverty. The authors noted that for participants, "family relationships... have proven to be of the utmost importance in creating an atmosphere conducive to postsecondary educational success" (p. 404). While their study was specific to first-generation students, the findings can be applied to other marginalized populations, included Black male students.

Conceptual Framework

To gain an in-depth understanding of the lived-experiences of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students, it is essential to also discover the essence of those experiences by analyzing relevant literature and reputable research. The research focused on Black male participants' college experiences and self-efficacy through the lens of Pascarella's General

Causal Model. According to Pascarella's (1985) General Causal Model, there is a significant relationship between the organization, its environment, and student retention. According to Mayhew, Pascarella, and Terenzini (2016), there are five major factors affecting student retention: students' circumstantial and pre-college experiences, the organization as a whole, the overall institutional setting, student interactions with other students and faculty and staff, and the value of student determination. It is possible that limitations and restrictions along with other varying factors and experiences by first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted students may have an impact on retention and graduation rates (2016).

There are many factors that influence student persistence and academic success, student retention, engagement, motivation, and ultimately their lived-experiences (Pascarella, 1985). The following experiential framework illustrates how students' pre-college characteristics and experiences along with their perceived self-efficacy influence their lived experiences (Figure 1). Pascarella's (1985) General Causal Model is significant for evaluating the effects of varying college environments as it relates to student learning and cognitive development.

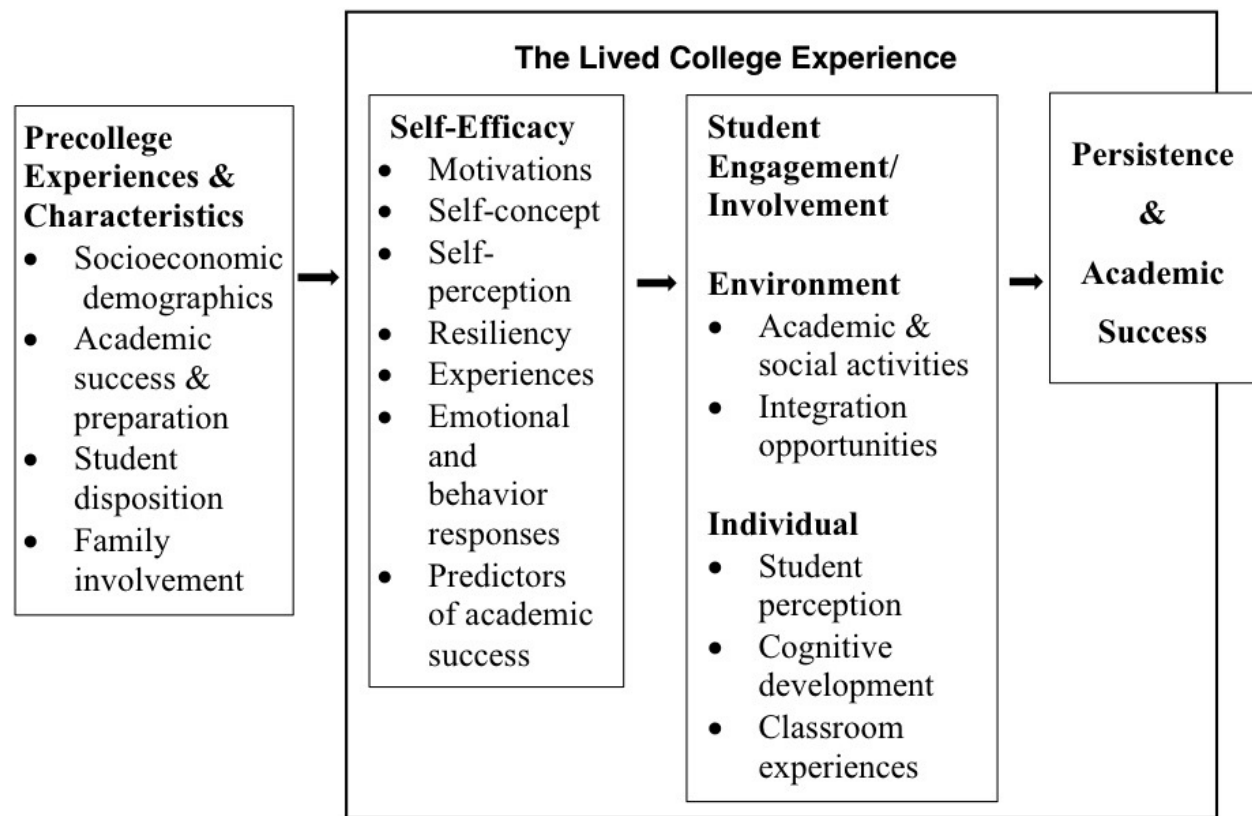


Figure 1. Experiential flow chart for the lived college experiences: How experiences and self-efficacy influence the college experience, persistence, and academic success.

METHODS

The researcher explored the lived experiences and perceptions of provisionally admitted Black male students at state institutions in Georgia to address the following research question: What are the common perceptions of provisionally admitted Black male students that influence their academic success at colleges and universities within the University System of Georgia? Data were collected using 90-minute in-person interviews, a Skype follow-up interview, and a 90-minute Skype focus group. The richness of data from the in-person interviews helped

construct the questions for the follow-up Skype interview and focus group.

Participants reflected on their provisional admittance and beginning college; the researcher gained an understanding of perceptions of their lived experiences. Potential participants were selected based on information gained from Georgia state institutions that provisionally admit students. Each campus's office of institutional research provided a list of full-time students who self-identified as "Male" and "Black" or "African American" on their demographic records, and who were provisionally admitted by the institution; a

total of eight students self-selected to participate in this study. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' pseudonyms, age,

classification, major, institution type, and participation in student support services and involvement in clubs or organizations.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Classification	Major	Stu. Supp.	GPA	Org.	1 st Gen	C/U
Dexter	19	Sophomore	Marine Science	Yes	2.43	No	No	U
Eddie	19	Sophomore	Behavioral Analysis	Yes	1.65	Yes	Yes	C
Hawk	19	Sophomore	Chemistry	Yes	2.0	No	Yes	C
Hernandez	20	Sophomore	Engineering	Yes	1.69	Yes	No	C
Larry	20	Junior	History	Yes	2.5	No	No	U
Quincy	20	Freshmen	Mass Comm.	Yes	2.0	No	No	U
Ralph	19	Freshmen	Chemistry	Yes	2.0	No	No	C
Ronnie	19	Sophomore	C.I.S.	Yes	2.6	No	No	U

Note: Stu. Support = Utilized Student Support Services, Org. = Organizational Involvement, 1st Gen = First Generation College Student, C = State College, U = State University

The study was limited by the participants' degree of comfort and ease discussing personal experiences and feelings during the interviews and focus groups. It included four institutions within Georgia: two state colleges and two state universities. The findings are not generalized to all state colleges or state universities. Participants were asked to reflect on their lived experiences with the phenomenon of being a provisionally admitted Black male college student. To achieve the goals of this research, a purposeful, inductive approach was used to identify similarities of responses within the emerging data and to identify relationships between the participants and their personal

experiences and the context in which they both exist.

Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized. Using Strauss's (1987) process of classification reasoning, the researcher determined connections and themes, established categories, and analyzed the data according to patterns of similarity, frequency, causation, and sequence. Using multi-method triangulation as a reflexive process, the researcher aimed to ensure the interpretations of the participants' responses were accurate and unbiased. Once the participants agreed their responses were reflected accurately, the researcher considered the data trustworthy. To ensure both

methodological approaches support the limited ideologies of this phenomenon, the researcher employed multi-method triangulation using interviews and focus groups to build a rationalization of the themes and to ensure internal credibility. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews captured the individuals' accounts of the phenomenon. To collect a general account of the phenomenon, the researcher conducted focus groups to verify and test the trustworthiness of the data retrieved from the interviews. By integrating the data from the individual interviews with data from the focus groups, the researcher added to the limited knowledge of this phenomenon by establishing a systematic guide for further research.

The following results provide an overview of student perceptions and describe themes associated with the researched question.

FINDINGS

The results of the interviews and Skype focus groups with eight participants were used to provide insight into the lived experiences of provisionally admitted Black male students as it relates to their academic success. After coding the interviews and Skype focus groups and identifying topics, themes, and sub-themes for both groups, coding analysis was used to analyze the overall themes that were consistent among the participants.

Two overarching themes emerged from the data: "a provisional opportunity" and "family matters."

A Provisional Opportunity

When considering the impact of the common perceptions of provisionally admitted Black male students, seven out of the eight participants expressed being accepted on a provisional basis was an "opportunity." Participants expressed taking a learning support course was essentially a way in. The participants acknowledged their academic deficiency from high school and during their first semester as "a struggle or weakness." Moreover, the men expressed there was no uniqueness to being a provisionally accepted student. Larry stated, "If I didn't have my learning support class, it could have been something else. I mean I don't think there is one student on this campus that feels like everything was perfect." These students do not perceive their admission status as unique, but instead as an opportunity.

Most of the participants believed being admitted provisionally was an "opportunity." Ronnie stated, "Though I was given a chance to go to college, I felt labeled. Yes, I struggled in math before, I felt like the class was a waste of time because we didn't do anything in the class. I didn't gain anything from it." He further stated, "I got more help from my roommate than my teacher." In the end,

apart from feeling “labeled,” Ronnie concluded, “I still had this chance, so I had to do something with it. Because someone else could have been accepted in my place.” Though there was initial resistance during the early part of this student’s first semester, he later described his admission as an “opportunity.”

The “opportunity” to be accepted was also described as motivational for some participants. Additionally, responses to questions regarding their overall experience being accepted provisionally, and how it impacted their success included, “It’s like it pushed me more every day.” Quincy stated, “It was a drive. Being provisionally accepted wasn’t going to determine who I am today.” The participants’ admission status was described as not having a negative connotation; seven out of eight participants found being provisionally admitted motivational.

Not all of the factors that impacted success were positive. Hawk admitted, “My laziness causes me not to do well in my classes. But, over the past semester or so, I have to learn how to manage my procrastination.” Hernandez discussed challenges relating to his housing situation, “Because I didn’t live on campus my first semester, I didn’t have access to everything I need to succeed. I had to ride to campus with a friend. The school ran out of housing, so I

had to rent an apartment. So, I struggled initially, but my mom pushes me every day.”

Three participants found there is a uniqueness to being a Black male student separate from being provisionally accepted. Eddie stated, “I think being a Black male altogether is kind of rough though. I feel like some people have different expectations of you as a Black male.” Another participant, Ralph, said:

There are a lot of stipulations that put us down as a culture and as a generation. Some times [sic] in our own race, our struggles are not recognized. For me being in college, many do not realize what I am here for is a daunting task. I feel like the odds have already stacked against us...us being here sets us apart. We are more than a statistic and what you see on T.V in terms of violence. One thing that motivates me is being everything the world says I cannot. So, because this school accepted provisional students, I have the opportunity today achieve great things. Maybe this makes me unique.

Lastly, Hernandez mentioned his professors were aware of the expectations of the world for Black males, so “they try to show us the right ways to handle certain situations and just be smart about what you do.” Statements such as Hernandez’s, as well as the

others above, indicate that regardless of past challenges, students viewed their admission as an opportunity and were willing to work hard to be successful.

Family Matters

Each participant asserted his family motivated him to succeed. While students' families ranged in the amount and type of support they could provide, each played a major role in student success. Two of the participants self-identified as first generation. An additional participant had a parent enroll in college for the first time the semester in which his interview was conducted. Eddie stated, "I come from nothing. I am reminded of where I come from. My family, especially my mother, supports me here in school." Dexter discussed the need to support family, sharing "I want to graduate so, I can take care of my mother." Participants were also asked "What are the factors that impact your ability to succeed?" Ralph stated, "Having my family to support me each step of the way means a lot to me." Eddie expressed, "I don't want to let my mom and family down."

Despite the differences in parental level of education of the participants, the men's family support is similar in terms of encouragement and motivation. The support differs in terms of participants who were not first-generation because of their parental knowledge of financial aid, the admissions

process, and available support systems on campus. Larry smiled ruefully, shook his head, and said, "Man, I know not to call financial aid for anything. My oldest sister could never get anything done over the phone." Quincy exclaimed, "Listen, my mom and I both are not good in math. She had to get help from a tutor on campus." Regardless of parental level of involvement, based on the quotes above, it is clear that this population, "family matters."

DISCUSSION

Each of the two identified themes apply to previous research. The "a provisional opportunity" theme connects to Cooper's (2010) assertion that community colleges provide growing academic opportunities for millions of students. For the purposes of this study, state colleges and universities also provide the same opportunities. All of the institutions have policies in place that support open admissions for students with college deficiencies. Each of the participants had math deficiencies, all having standardized math test scores below the institution's requirement. According to the participants, the three most common support services they frequented were the Writing Center, tutorial services for math, and academic advisement.

The findings of the study represent one of Cooper's (2010) social support systems that are offered at each institution.

Cooper asserted community colleges help students requiring remediation improve their academic success. He found those social support systems included academic guidance and advising, student success courses, and learning communities (Cooper, 2010). Both Ralph and Ronnie discussed using student support services. Ralph stated, “The student tutors really help me out. When I still don’t get it, they don’t get frustrated. They tried teaching me another way.” Ronnie said, “There are some students in the Writing Center that help me out.” However, other participants discussed lack of engagement on their campus. “There aren’t any groups on campus that focus on one subject” Larry noted; Hawk said, “I wish I can get together with others in my dorm.”

The “family matters” theme supports Harper’s (2012) qualitative report. Harper contended family support, an element of pre-college socialization, is one of the many factors that influences academic success, retention, and graduation of Black males. The findings of this study also support McCarron and Inkelas (2006) assertion that family support is one of the greatest predictors of academic success and inspiration for first generation college students. Further, while not all participants were first-generation college students, the findings support Bryan and Simmons’ (2009) assertion that family relationships and experiences are significant in

promoting social development and academic success.

Application to the General Causal Model

In this research, it was determined pre-college experiences, self-efficacy, and engagement impacted students’ perceptions of their lived experiences during the first academic year. The results support Pascarella’s (1985) argument regarding the many factors that influence student persistence and academic success, student retention, engagement, motivation, and ultimately lived-experiences.

Family and upbringing played a major role in the precollege experiences for this group. Eddie’s statement, “I come from nothing. I am reminded of where I come from. My family, especially my mother, supports me here in school,” is indicative of multiple participants, and the Black male population at many institutions. Further, and particularly for this group, provisional admittance status did not negatively impact self-efficacy. Statements such as Larry’s “It was a smooth transition. I can’t say I had a problem with it, as well as Hawk’s “I was confident” and Hernandez’s “Provisional acceptance is just a mindset!” indicate that students were confident in their abilities to succeed and would not let their provisional status impact their experience.

Finally, student engagement in campus services was a key factor for participants in this study. While some campus services such as the writing center or tutoring were viewed positively, others, such as financial aid were not. Regardless of perception, those services undoubtedly influenced student lived experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study indicate that participants understood they were given a chance to succeed, but acknowledge they need a support system in order to do so. Institutions should assess students' individualized self-efficacy to build understandings of the internal, self-existing, self-perceived competence of provisionally admitted Black male students. Creating increased opportunities for student engagement will allow provisionally accepted Black male students to more easily transition into their college experience, countering potential pre-college characteristics developed in K-12.

Administrators should encourage student affairs professionals and faculty to become more engaged with their students, both inside and outside of the classroom to establish lasting relationships and mentorship. Peer mentoring programs could help first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students transition successfully as well. As students saw admission to the institution

as "a provisional opportunity," structured mentoring programs could help students succeed with the opportunity. Other structured programming, for example Black Male Initiatives, have been identified as successful in their efforts to improve Black male retention, persistence, and graduation rate. By providing academic and social support, these programs aid Black men in developing a sense of belonging and gaining cultural capital (Arthur, 2017; Brooms, 2017; 2018).

Further, both student affairs professionals and faculty should help the students become engaged on campus. In addition to strategies such as Black Male Initiatives, an assessment of students' interests is needed to evaluate the needs for clubs and organizations offered on campuses. This supports both Harper's (2012) concept of Black male college achievement and Jenson's (2011) factors influencing retention. Even though institutions may offer a variety of clubs and organizations, students may not be aware of them. Larry's comment above, "there aren't any groups on campus that focus on one subject" is an indicator that, at least for Larry, there is a lack of knowledge regarding ways he could get involved. Given that, it is necessary for faculty, student affairs professionals, and undergraduate student leaders to make sure Black male students are not only aware of campus organizations, but that they also feel welcomed to participate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Given the increasing population of students requiring remediation at state institutions, college administrators need to develop a greater understanding of students' precollege experiences and characteristics and perceptions during their first academic year. There is a need for research that explores various assessments of student interests for implementing on-campus organizations and programming. Student involvement and engagement is also a measurement of academic success, integration, and progress. A recommendation is to replicate this study at the same four institutions to determine if any modifications have been made to improve the experience, retention, and graduation rates of provisionally admitted Black male students. An additional recommendation is to reproduce this study in a different setting such as other Georgia institutions or in a different state to determine the impact of participants' precollege characteristics and experiences on academic success.

Further, other areas that could impact a student's self-efficacy and success in college as it applies to provisionally admitted Black male students can be explored. Relationships, technology use, substance use, and peer interactions and influences are some of many topics that could provide additional insight on the population. Finally, research on strategies designed to specifically

support Black male students, such as Black Male Initiatives and other formal mentoring programs, will help develop a greater understanding of not only the students themselves, but of the effectiveness of the programs designed to support their success.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study support the need for assessing institutional programming and organizations to attract the interest of a diverse student body. Additionally, it would be appropriate to consider the effectiveness of student support services such as academic guidance and advising, student success courses, learning communities, informed financial aid support, and social networks. One notable finding was that participants wanted to use campus services, but quickly became aware of which services were perceived as being more or less helpful than others. While no campus service will satisfy every student on every issue, it is imperative that services are viewed positively by students and when problems cannot be resolved, the student understands why they cannot. Student affairs professionals, faculty, and other stakeholders have a responsibility to best aid Black male students as they progress through this "provisional opportunity." Further, it is evident that "family matters" to this population of students. Family supported this population of students, and

the students wanted to support them. Understanding students' backgrounds and the role

that family plays in their lives can be a key piece in helping them succeed.

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